REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*. Oscar Burge (trans.). Foreword by Charles Taylor. New French Thought. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997. xv + 228 pp. ISBN: 0691044066. French original, *Le désenchantement du monde: Une histoire politique de la religion*. Bibliothèque des sciences humaines. Paris: Gallimard, 1985. xxiii + 306 pp. ISBN 207070341X.

MARCEL GAUCHET: THE DISENCHANTMENT OF THE WORLD[1]

Luther H. Martin

If the view of "religion" as some sort of *sui generis* phenomenon is to be abandoned, as a number of scholars now advocate, then surely "it"—however "religion" might be defined—is thoroughly implicated with the other social activities that characterize human existence: the production of knowledge (science), systems of exchange (economics), codifications of societal rules (law), the organization and distribution of power (politics), etc., all of which have traditionally been studied without much reference to religion even as religion has been defined in a privileged vacuum. The implication of religious activities with the other enterprises of human sociality is not a novel view; it is grounded already in the work of Max Weber and, to some extent, Karl Marx. This implication has, however, been largely neglected by scholars of religion over the last century. Marcel Gauchet's *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion* is, by contrast, a recent contribution to that earlier tradition which situates the study of religion in that of the *sciences humaine* generally.

Marcel Gauchet is Professor at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris where he is also editor of *Le Débate*, a journal for contemporary French political thought. Along with a new generation of increasingly prominent French theorists, Marcel

[1] This essay and the two following, by Herbert Frey and Alan Olson, were first presented at a review panel on Gauchet's *The Disenchantment of the World*, organized for the North American Association for the Study of Religion at the annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in Boston, 1999. They have been revised for publication.

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Gauchet has been styled an "anti-postmodernist" or "neo-modernist" (Lilly 1998: 593-596). As a group, these theorists are concerned with political philosophy and especially with a critique of what they consider to be the dominance of French intellectual life since the end of World War II by an "illiberal" politics, e.g., Marxism, structuralism, existentialism, and the anti-rationalism of postmodernism —indeed, an illiberalism that they trace back to developments following the French Revolution itself. This illiberalism is grounded, they agree, in the speculative traditions of Hegel and Marx, in the antihumanistic tradition of Kojève's "death of man" (Kojève 1947: 388), and in the antirationalist tradition of Nietzsche (although they share the latter's antimetaphystical emphasis). Postmodernism, this group argues, is itself a historical production which, consequently, has a historical explanation. Rather than representing the "end of history", it is postmodernism, they conclude, that is ending (Lilly 1998: 594-595).

By contrast, these theorists concern themselves with "the presuppositions of a modern humanism that are based on the democratic liberal principles largely assumed in the United States and England and described in the nineteenth century by Tocqueville:[2] "limited government, the rule of law, multiparty elections, an independent judiciary and civil service, civilian control of the military, individual rights to free association and worship, private property, and so forth" (Lilla 1994: 4). They hold, consequently, that "individual autonomy … [is] possible", that this autonomy is "the aim of modern politics", and that it is "discoverable through reason" (Lilla 1994: 12-13). They champion a concept of the individual and of history as the product of free human agency (Lilly 1998: 593). Their "modern humanism" is not individualistic, however, but economic in the "sense of a general scheme of relating to things" (Gauchet 1997: 94). It seeks to advance "a conception of rationality and the subject that leads neither to the ideological excesses of the post-Enlightenment nor to their debasement in postmodernism" (Lilly 1998: 595), "a philosophy of the subject that makes universal political and moral judgments possible without appeals to religion, tradition, or human nature" (Lilla 1994: 19).

For example, in the recently translated *Madness and Democracy: the Modern Psychiatric Universe* (1999), published in the same series as *The Disenchantment of the World*, Gauchet and his co-author Gladys Swain

[2] The neo-modernists generally are drawn to the thought of Tocqueville (Lilly 1998: 595), though Gauchet is somewhat of a dissenter (Gauchet 1994).

argue that the reorganization of psychiatric treatment following the French revolution marked a new extension of political authority that replaced "appeals to divine right or tradition with uncompromising adherence to the collective will of citizens". In contrast to Michel Foucault, to whom the title of their work pays homage (Foucault 1965), Gauchet and Swain conclude that

> [t]his changed vision of politics and social life gave the state a new, exalted, but dangerous dignity as the agent through which human beings became "the sole producers of their own history," the power to whom people looked for the realization of their humanity. (Seigel 1999: xiii)

In opposition to this emergent absolutism of the state, the development of democracy should be based on an "equal inclusion of all people in the body of citizens, based on their common right to share in the making of fundamental laws"; a moral treatment of what appears "as a loss of reason … would return large numbers of the insane to ordinary life" (Seigel 1999: xvi). Whereas Foucault viewed the establishment of asylums—and prisons, and schools, and factories and workers' movements—as a history of separation and difference, Gauchet and Swain view this history as representing "a new sense of the human ability—even responsibility—to reshape social practices in accord with perceived human needs" (Seigel 1999: xv-xvi).

"When seeking … [theories] of human behavior", "French political thought has repeatedly turned to anthropology" (Lilla 1994: 20; Gauchet 1997: 102). This anthropological tradition derives largely from attempts to explain, or to explain away, the perseverance of religion following the French Revolution, a "scientific study" that culminated in the works of Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss (Lilla 1994: 20). Gauchet similarly announces that "entering the age of individualism means leaving the age of the religious, where both *dependency on the whole* and *indebtedness to the other* are simultaneously relinquished" (Gauchet 1997: 27). Unlike the strictly secular proclivities advanced by some of the "neo-modernists", however, Gauchet attempts, in *The Disenchantment of the World*, to incorporate the research on ancient hierarchy and modern individualism by the historical anthropologist Louis Dumont (Dumont 1966; 1977; 1986) into a universal religious philosophy of history that correlates the development of the state with a specific change in religious consciousness, what Gauchet terms a "dynamic of transcendence" (Gauchet 1997: 47). According to Gauchet, primitive societies, which he defines as any

society prior to the emergence of the state, organized their world by placing their source outside of themselves with the unchanging gods to whom human beings owed everything. Several millennia ago, however, the religious began to be drawn into history with the rise of the state which, consequently, precipitated a "dialectic between this visible force and its invisible guarantor, between the actual and the presumed power" as the great world religions began to represent their gods as distant though still available (Gauchet 1997: 40). "The [subsequent] gap between the here-below and the beyond, [the] subjectivation of the divine principle, and the universalization of life values" are the three main outcomes of this division (Gauchet 1997: 44). By removing the gods from the world, by making them into "subjects", humans begin to fashion themselves into a subject as well. Once the gods departed their terrestrial abode, according to Gauchet, humans began for the first time to exercise control over their own world through the state. Consequently, the key to understanding modern history, according to Gauchet, is to understand how man has sought to "possess" himself in politics by slowly "dispossessing" himself of any external debt to religion and by engaging himself in a history of social experimentation (Gauchet 1997: 51, 57). "As God withdrew", Gauchet concludes, "the world changed from something *presented* … to something to be *constituted*" (Gauchet 1997: 95). "The history of civilized forms of thinking, of philosophy working its way from myth, through theological speculation, to practical science" has, according to Gauchet's thesis, its beginnings in this making the divine transcendent with its consequent "disenchantment of the world" (Gauchet 1997: 53). Our "democratic, individualizing, state-based, historical, technological, capitalist world", was formed, Gauchet concludes, by humans daring to fill the void left by the retreat of God (Gauchet 1997: 103). As the first monotheistic religion founded on the notion of divine incarnation, Christianity exemplifies for Gauchet this process most clearly; Gauchet understands Christianity, therefore, to be "the religion of man's exit from religion".[3]

There are at least two major theoretical issues reintroduced to the study of religion by Gauchet's work: (a) a confirmation of Weber's thesis that religion will decline in the face of modernization and (b) an argument for this thesis in the context of universal history.

Weber's thesis that secularization and the decline of religion will

[3] This summary of Gauchet's argument follows that by Mark Lilla (1994: 22f.).

be the consequence of modernization, industrialization and rationalization, has, it is often argued, been historically disconfirmed by the dramatic proliferation of new religions in the context of two of the most modern and industrialized societies yet produced by human beings: Japan and the United States. Gauchet argues, however, that it is precisely in the context of modern, developed countries that we see the "end of religion". By the "end of religion", Gauchet emphasizes that he does not "signal the disappearance of every type of religious experience" but rather "the end of the principle of dependency structuring social space in all known societies prior to our own" (Gauchet 1997: 163). Gauchet's argument turns on his Durkheimian definition of religion as a social or collective shaping of "human's material, social, and mental life" (Gauchet 1997: 21, 23-25, 101). To that extent, he understands the modern individualized, interiorized, and subjectivized emphases on a personal "spirituality" to be a "residue" of the "functional efficacy" that once animated the socio-political dynamics of human societies. "The gods have survived, but their power is fading" (Gauchet 1997: 4, see also 27).

By way of anecdotal illustration of Gauchet's thesis about the socio-political impotence of religion in the modern world, a national panel of leading journalists and historians recently assembled by the *Newseum*, a museum of journalism funded by The Freedom Forum, included not a single religious event in their compilation of the 100 top "Stories of the Century".[4]

Second, and by contrast to the focus on "thick descriptions" of "local" histories that has dominated scholarship during the last half century, Gauchet dares to argue his theses in the framework of universal history, in full cognizance of the "uncertainties" involved in any such accounts. "I am fully aware", he cautions:

[4] In response to the *Newseum*'s list, Charles C. Haynes, of the First Amendment Center in Nashville, Tennessee, solicited "10 religious developments of the 20th century that have had the most impact on the United States and the world". Acknowledging a paucity of response, he proposed his own list. His list, to say the least, begs the question of documenting "religious" events. Thus, while he includes on his list such religiously-oriented stories as "[t]he emergence of Islam as a major force in the world community" and "[t]he involvement of evangelical and fundamentalist Christians in American political life", he also includes stories which beg the question of being "religious" such as "[t]he dominance of the scientific worldview in the West" and "[t]he downfall of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc nations" (Haynes 1999).

> that things are "more complicated" than I have presented them, I understand mistrust toward the genre "philosophy of history" and I am aware of the damage caused by "ideas of totality". My sole excuse for deliberately taking these risks is the need to understand and my conviction that these risks must be taken. This does not mean we should yield to the lure of speculation, but that we should respond critically to the need for meaning whose main victims are those who naively believe they have freed themselves from that need. (Gauchet 1997: 17)

However, Gauchet avers that "[w]e can no longer be granted the luxury of peacefully cultivating our tiny gardens within the framework of a well-organized division of labor where our overall understanding of things is supposed to increase by systematically accumulating minutiae" (Gauchet 1997: 17). He is in good company. Wholistic accounts of humanity have been proposed since those of the Christian and Muslim world chroniclers of the Middle Ages (Breisach 1994) through Sir Walter Raleigh's *Historie of the World in Five Books* (1614) and René Sédillot's *History of the World in Two-Hundred and Forty Pages* (1949, trans. 1951), to Jared Diamond's popular *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (1997) and David Fromkin's recent *The Way of the World: From the Dawn of Civilizations to the Eve of the Twenty-First Century* (1999), in 250 pages (Everdell 1999: 9). Even "[t]he most erudite *internal* history of Christianity", Gauchet concludes, "can teach us hundreds of essential things about it: but it would still avoid the main issue, namely, what constitutes its decisive originality in relation to other religions" (Gauchet 1999: 18, emphasis added).

While recognizing the ambiguities and limits of human accounts, Gauchet nevertheless pursues historiography as a "project of human self-understanding that lies forever before us, rather than as an appeal to the past to stand witness to a knowledge we think we already possess" (Seigel 1999: xxi). "Post-religious society", Gauchet concludes, "is … a society where the question of madness and everyone's inner unease experiences unprecedented growth" (Gauchet 1997: 206). In contrast to postmodernist pronouncements concerning the "end of history", history remains for Gauchet and the neo-modernists an "open-ended process" for the theoretical and practical endeavours of human beings" (Lilly 1998: 595; Gauchet 1997: 72).

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MARCEL GAUCHET'S DISENCHANTED WORLD AND NIETZSCHE'S CONCEPT OF NIHILISM

HERBERT FREY

Libri historiam habent, 'books have their history', but not books alone; at times, even the discovery of books may have its own story. As a rule such a story would be rather difficult to localize but sometimes it can be told. I came across Marcel Gauchet when I attended the 1998 meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in Montreal. I was speaking with a colleague about my research on Nietzsche and my analyses of the comparative classical and Jewish-Christian histories of religion, when all of the sudden he said, "well then, you should really buy a book which I have recently read, Marcel Gauchet's *The Disenchantment of the World*. Although it was

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